



# CultureWork

A Periodic Broadside \*  
for Arts and Culture Workers

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Institute for Community Arts Studies  
Arts & Administration Program, University of Oregon

## Art Teacher Censorship of Student Produced Art in Georgia's Public High Schools

**Bruce Bowman**

**A**s a public high school art teacher this researcher has often told students they could not produce certain images or objects in the art classroom. Motivations for censoring student work ranged from fear of administrative reactions, to classroom control issues, to personal feelings of uneasiness with certain imagery. Discussions with other art educators in Georgia indicated that they, too, practiced censorship of student produced art in the classroom.

### **National Art Education Association Supports Free Expression**

The National Art Education Association (NAEA) has a policy statement on freedom of expression which discourages the use of censorship. In fact, the final paragraph of the NAEA statement notes that "The art educator should impress upon students

the vital importance of freedom of expression as a basic premise in a free democratic society and urge students to guard against any efforts to limit or curtail that freedom." This researcher, and other art educators who belong to the NAEA, seem to censor more than policy suggests. To better understand the breadth and content of teacher generated censorship of student art, the following questions were addressed:

1. What classroom produced images are prohibited by art educators who belong to the Georgia Art Educators Association (GAEA), a local arm of the NAEA?
2. What criteria do these art educators use to censor student work produced in the art classroom?
3. How often do these art educators feel they have to censor student produced work in the art classroom?

### **Georgia Art Educators Respond to Mailed Instrument**

An instrument designed to answer these questions, and cover letter, were mailed to public high school art teachers in Georgia, who are members of the GAEA. Approval for the mailing was granted by the GAEA Executive Board and the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects at The University of Georgia. The instrument contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions along with a request for any additional information presented in the accompanying cover-letter. A total of 106 instruments were mailed out in September 1998, with 66 completed instruments being returned.

### **Instrument Highlights Controversial Images**

The first section of the instrument was designed to identify specific images not allowed for student production in the art room and reasons for not allowing them. A total of 20 controversial images, such as "obscene gestures" and "drug imagery" were listed with a total of 15 conditions for prohibiting the imagery, such as "if it lacked artistic integrity" or "if produced just to shock." Teachers were asked to bubble-in corresponding prohibited imagery with reasons for prohibition. They could also mark if they prohibited the imagery to be produced "under any circumstance." Also, if any image in this section was left blank, the teacher was indicating there were no conditions for prohibiting that image for classroom production. There was not a single image listed that was unconditionally allowed by all the teachers.

### **Instrument Invites Written Responses**

The second section of the instrument contained the following two items: "Please

list other images/ objects not allowed, not mentioned already" and, "in general, how much do you have to censor?" Though some of the data from this study was analyzed in a more quantitative way to determine "what" of the listed imagery was censored and "how many" times censorship of it occurred, the open-ended questions provided more insight into the thoughts and motivations of the teachers. The second section also gave the teachers an opportunity to list images they prohibited that were not already listed on the instrument.

## **Results of the Study**

Though 66 instruments were returned, not all of them could be used for analysis. Eleven instruments were not used for the first section for the following reasons: three were from middle school teachers, two were from elementary school teachers, two were from private school teachers, one was from a teacher in Tennessee, and three were not bubbled in a clear way. A total of 55 usable instruments were tabulated from the first section (see table 1 and table 2). For analyzing the second section of the instrument the three teachers who had not bubbled-in the first section in an understandable way were still used for their written responses. 58 returned instruments were analyzed for the second section of the instrument. Since the study was concerned with public high school art teachers in Georgia the other eight teachers were not included at all.

**Table 1**  
**Public High School Art Teacher's Responses**  
**to Student Produced Subject Matter**  
**in the Art Classroom**  
**(Bubbled responses from instrument)**

Total # of teachers = 55 % of teachers	<b>Not Allowed Under Any Circumstance</b>	<b>Not Allowed Conditionally</b>	<b>Allowed Under Any Circumstance</b>
<b>Ceramics</b>			
Obscene gestures	49 = 89%	5 = 9%	1 = 2%
Pipes	45 = 82%	8 = 14%	2 = 4%
Genitalia	45 = 82%	7 = 13%	3 = 5%
Drug imagery	43 = 78%	11 = 20%	1 = 2%
Ashtrays	35 = 64%	10 = 18%	10 = 18%
Gun Reproductions	31 = 56%	21 = 38%	3 = 5%
<b>Painting/ drawing</b>			
Sexual acts	48 = 87%	6 = 11%	1 = 2%
Obscene gestures	45 = 82%	9 = 16%	1 = 2%
Racist imagery	31 = 56%	23 = 42%	1 = 2%
Drug imagery	29 = 53%	22 = 40%	4 = 7%
Gang imagery	26 = 47%	25 = 45%	4 = 7%
Sacrilegious imagery	26 = 47%	25 = 45%	4 = 7%
Crude humor	23 = 42%	27 = 49%	5 = 9%
Full nudity	19 = 34%	34 = 62%	2 = 4%
Insensitive images	15 = 27%	35 = 64%	5 = 9%
Antigovernment images	14 = 25%	31 = 56%	10 = 18%
Gambling subject matter	13 = 24%	34 = 62%	8 = 14%
Criminal violence	11 = 20%	40 = 73%	4 = 7%
General Violence	10 = 18%	40 = 73%	5 = 9%
Partial nudity	6 = 11%	42 = 76%	7 = 13%

<b>Table 2</b> <b>Public High School Art Teacher's Conditions</b> <b>for Censoring Student Produced Work</b> <b>in the Art Classroom</b> <b>(Bubbled responses from instrument)</b> <b>55 teachers x 20 images for each condition=1100 possible responses per condition</b>			
<b>Image not allowed...</b>	<b>Combined Images</b>	<b>Ceramics</b>	<b>Painting/ drawing</b>
...Under any circumstance	564	248	316
<b>Image not allowed if...</b>	(20 images)	(6 images)	(14 images)
...It lacked artistic integrity.	153	19	134
...not discussed with me first.	141	14	127
...produced just to shock.	103	12	91
...it challenged school policy.	95	19	76
...it disturbed the class.	52	8	44
...it celebrated illegal actions.	49	9	40
...it celebrated degrading activity.	45	5	40
...it is a lower level art class.	30	2	28
...it offends the general public.	26	3	23
...it upset me.	14	1	13
...parents complained.	14	3	11
...it could be used for illegal actions.	9	5	4
...not openly discussed with class.	6	1	5
...other art teachers would object.	0	0	0

## Most Controversial Imagery is Prohibited

As indicated in tables 1 and 2, very little of the imagery listed is allowed to be produced "under any circumstance." Most imagery is either "not allowed under any circumstance" or "not allowed conditionally." Images dealing with sexual themes or deemed "obscene" are censored the most. Drug imagery and smoking paraphernalia are also heavily censored by these public high school art teachers. While images dealing with violence and partial nudity are the least censored, they are conditionally prohibited the most. The top reason given by the teachers for prohibiting such work is if it lacked artistic integrity. Pre-teacher approval and intent is also important to these educators. See tables 3 and 4 for a summation of images censored under any circumstance and reasons for conditionally censoring marginal images.

## Additional Imagery Prohibited

Some responses to the question of "images/ objects not allowed, not mentioned

already" did include images not listed in Section I. The production of "trite images-lady bugs, butterflies, hearts, peace signs, mushrooms," and cliched imagery, were not allowed by two of the respondents. Another respondent did not allow the copying from other sources, "Cosmopolitan magazine." Other images noted by teachers for select censoring included band logos and "digs" at administrators and/ or other teachers. Also noted, but not relating to specific imagery, were prohibition of "drawing with blood or body fluids" and the problems associated with photography, i.e. monitoring negatives in the darkroom.

## Prescriptive Censorship Practiced

When one looks at the types of images prohibited and reasons for prohibiting the images, it would seem that these art teachers censor frequently. However, when asked the question on the instrument, 36 of the 58 teachers noted that they rarely censored student produced art works (see table 5). A form of censorship called "prescriptive censorship" seems to provide an answer. Prescriptive censorship occurs when "official announcements [are made] specifying the qualities expected in a written [or creative] work" (Rice, p. 745). One teacher who noted they censored very little wrote "...the students know what I'll accept and what is expected. I guess the standard has been set." Another teacher noted that "I haven't found it a big problem. After I explain what can't be produced, students generally don't challenge it. I explain that they can do what they please after hours as an artist." 19 teachers provided similar explanations for their lack of censorship.



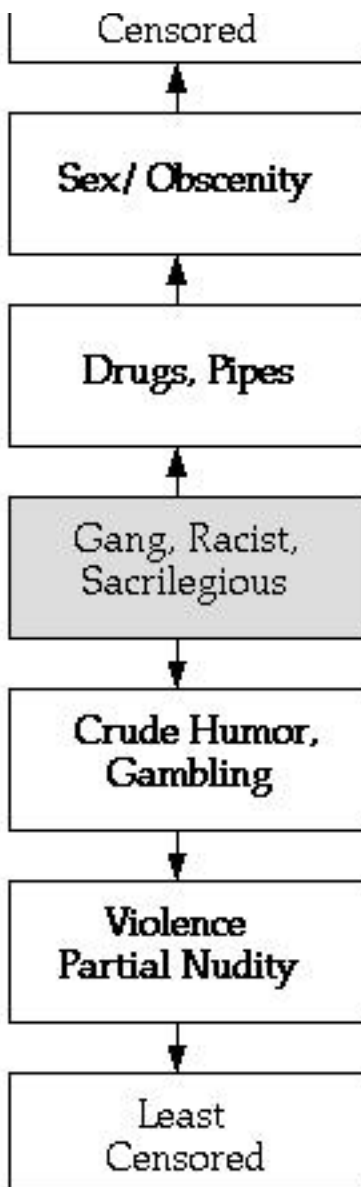


Table 3  
Range of images Censored  
Under Any Circumstance

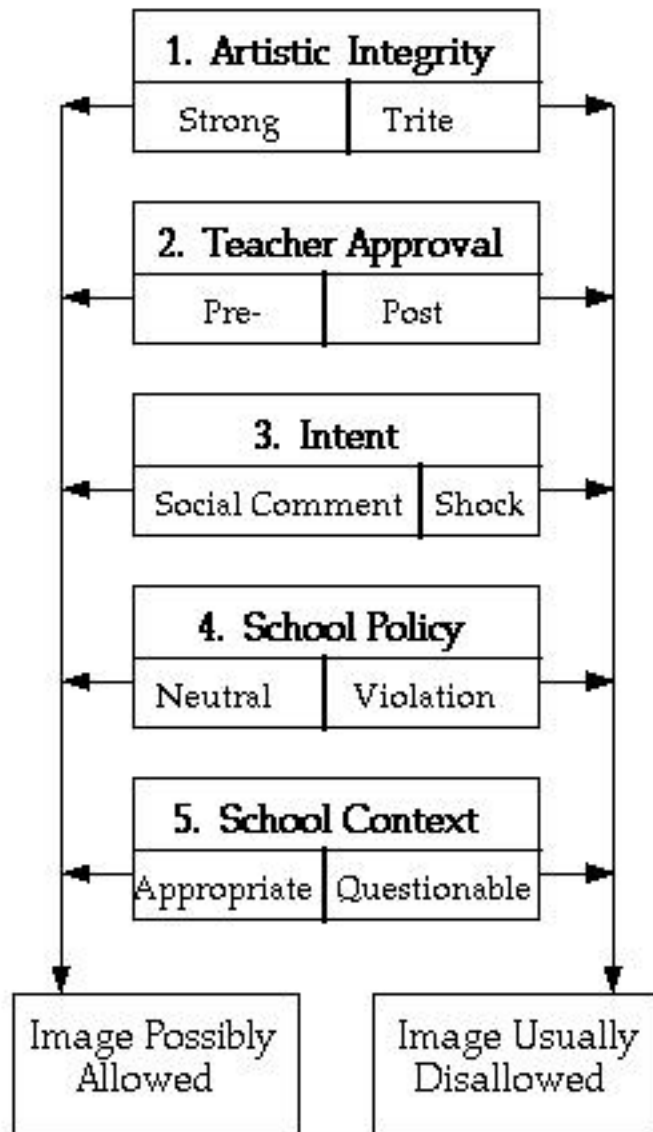


Table 4  
Reasons Given for  
Censorship Decisions

36 Seldom	17 No Response	5 Often

Table 5  
Amount teachers reported censoring student work/ 58 teachers

## Job Security Motivating Factor

A Colorado teacher, Mr. Wilder, was recently fired for showing an "R" rated movie to his 17 and 18 year olds in a logic and debate class (Simpson, 1998). This real threat to employment is noted by a teacher in this study who wrote: "I let them [the



students] know that they have every opportunity to make art on their own outside of school- but in school, I need to be able to keep my job/ NOT get in trouble. They understand and respect that." Violation of a school policy is another factor which could also have an effect on a teachers employment status. One teacher noted that "if the student produces something that would be considered a violation of school policy if brought to school, that work is not allowed (pipes, bongos, etc.)." As in the case of Mr. Wilder, the courts are going to support the right of the school board to enforce policy (Simpson, 1998). It has been ruled that "if speech harms or disrupts the educational process in any way, it can be restrained... even if such a decision might violate students' First Amendment rights" (Turner, 1994, p. 13-14).

## **Art Teachers Work Autonomously**

Of the 14 reasons for prohibiting conditional work, the only one not marked at all was "if other art teachers would object." This was a surprise as this researcher has consulted with other art teachers in the past to help resolve censorship questions. Also, with a freedom of expression policy statement published by NAEA, it would seem that art teachers would want to be unified on such matters. Perhaps the most understandable reason for this lack of consensus is the autonomy most art teachers experience in their schools. It would seem that where schools have more than one art teacher, they might discuss censorship decisions. And still, another reason for this lack of unity might simply be that different teachers have different tolerance levels, personally and from their community schools, making it difficult to apply a set standard or rely on other art teachers' guidance.

## **Recommendations**

While minimizing censorship in the art classroom will not be an easy task, developing policy statements to present to local school boards would give the art teacher more security in allowing students to express controversial, yet relevant imagery. Opening dialog among art teachers at the high school level could also encourage the development of more tolerant stances. Including discussions of controversial subject matters and ways to approach them in teacher education programs could help build further support.

Through additional research in other states, more can be learned about classroom censorship and its effect on student development. In Mary Herzog's (1995) study of censored teachers in southern Appalachia she concluded that "small, covert types of censorship experiences seemed to have as powerful effect on teachers' practices as did the more conspicuous episodes" (p. 147). In turn, how are students affected by censorship?

As the first article of the series on "Censorship in the Art Classroom" noted, "Teaching children to create works of art as part of their emotional and conceptual growth requires a curriculum and pedagogy of openness, honesty, and clarity, as



well as an environment where children can explore and discuss life's difficult questions" (Anderson & Garoian, 1996, p. 37). And as Diane Gregory (1996) noted, "Censoring works of art will not make challenging images go away. Whitewashing the art education curriculum will not make controversial ideas go away" (p. 53).

As art educators, community members, and school officials, let's prepare to meet this challenge and open a dialog to test the waters of tolerance. Let's minimize censorship in the artroom.

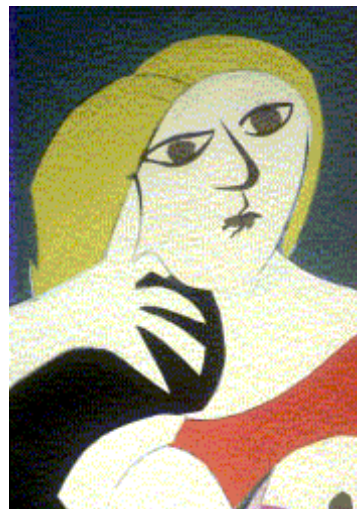
## References:

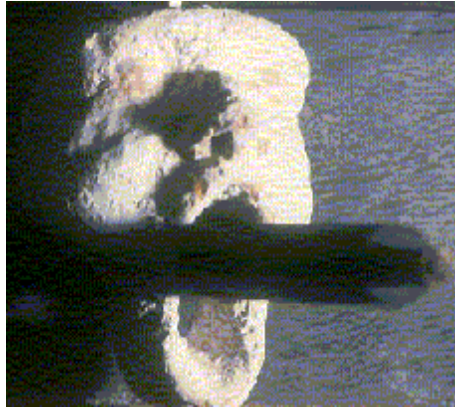
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## An Exhibition of Controversial Student Work

Click on a detail thumbnail to see the full-size image:





While most of these works cannot be displayed in the front gallery, I feel it is important to allow the student to produce them. Classroom management, over these issues at least, has not been a problem. Also, while my principal would not allow the "Picasso Study" to be displayed, he brought no issue to its classroom production. --Bruce Bowman

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**Bruce Bowman** has been a public high school art teacher for the last seven years and am currently working toward a doctorate in art education from the University of Georgia. This study is part of his research for the dissertation. Bruce welcomes dialogue on this topic. Email: <[bebow@peachnet.campus.mci.net](mailto:bebow@peachnet.campus.mci.net)>.

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